

## **The Practice of God-Centred Prayer**

We have been looking at the topic of God-centred prayer. We have seen that God-centred prayer is the only kind that glorifies God, and is therefore the only kind that He is sure to answer. We saw God-centred prayer is when we abandon self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, and come humbly to God for power and satisfaction. God is then glorified, not from our giving to Him, but from our hungry hearts which find their fulfilment in Him.

The purpose of God-centred prayer is to glorify God and satisfy man. We then saw its power. The power of God-centred prayer is not our earnestness or our persistence. The power lies in the fact that prayer is really God talking to Himself in the theatre of the human mind. The Father is the willing audience, the Son is the authority by which our prayers are heard, and the Spirit through His sanctifying work causes us to increasingly know and do the will of God. Thus we pray the things that God wants, with lives that please Him, asking for His Son's sake, and He is pleased to answer. This is the power behind it.

But now we move on to more practical matters: what does it sound like? What does it ask for? Thus today we look at the Practice of God-centred prayer, and next week, the Priorities of God-centred prayer.

When we begin to speak about the practice of prayer, two dangers confront us. The first one is the danger of ritualistic formalism. As soon as we begin to mention things like duration and posture and manner and time of day, there is always the temptation of the human heart to focus on these things and our pride takes over. Pretty soon, we are judging our spirituality by how long we pray, or at what time we get up to pray, or how thick our prayer book of requests is. The danger of many books on prayer is that by listing the amazing prayer lives of the saints of years gone by they tend to suggest that prayer is an end in itself. The focus tends to shift from a God-centred perspective, to the discipline and sacrifice of many great Christians. We start to glorify their prayer lives instead of glorifying God. There is a subtle shift away from God-centeredness to man-centeredness. We become so in love with our discipline or our structure, that we miss the entire point – to glorify God, not our own willpower. So there is the danger of externalism and formalism as soon as we begin to talk about the practice of prayer.

Many people like formulas and recipes – they want to know the quick-fix secret to a prayer life, and so they love to focus on the externals of how long, where, how – as if prayer is some kind of exercise that simply requires good technique to master. But prayer is God-centred, and therefore it will come in so many different forms, since God is a Person whom we are relating to as persons ourselves. For prayer to be so bolted down to a structure, it runs the risk of becoming the vain repetitions that Jesus warned against.

The other danger lies, predictably, on the other extreme. Here the temptation is to so exalt spontaneity and freedom in our communication with God that we end up babbling, our minds wandering, becoming irreverent, and often meaningless in our words. It is ironic that vain repetitions – the heaping up of empty phrases can result from both too much structure, and too little. To have no practice of prayer – no idea of

the actual mode in which it takes place is to eventually not pray at all. An audience with the King of Heaven, as much as it is communion, involves some kind of manners, some kind of approach, and some kind of structure.

So we see that we do have the need for seeing the Bible's perspective on the practice of prayer. We do not want to idolise any particular practice, we want to simply see how they can aid us in being God-centred in our prayers.

Now we might split the practice of prayer up into two sections – the attitudes of God-centred prayer, and the actions of God-centred prayer. The Bible has much to say on the attitudes of God-centred prayer - giving us direct commands of how and how not to pray. However, when it comes to the outward actions – the Bible more often indirectly suggests these things by example than by direct precept.

So let us look at **the attitudes of God-centred prayer**. The attitudes of the heart are fundamental to God-centred prayer. All the right outward signs or methods of prayer would be meaningless if the heart-attitudes were wrong. Indeed, even if our requests all line up with Biblical requests and were in the will of God; if our heart-attitudes were wrong – our prayer is not God-centred.

On the negative side, there are number of heart and life attitudes that the Bible specifically lists as hindering or completely obstructing our prayers, which we must beware of. The first is wilful disobedience. The Israelites experienced God's hardness to their cries, because they had been disobedient. Moses tells them:

*: "So I spake unto you; and ye would not hear, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD, and went presumptuously up into the hill. And the Amorites, which dwelt in that mountain, came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and destroyed you in Seir, even unto Hormah. And ye returned and wept before the LORD; but the LORD would not hearken to your voice, nor give ear unto you." (Deu 1:43-45)*

A pattern of unrepentant, wilful disobedience is a life that is self-centred; God's glory is clearly not its aim. Such an overall attitude to life makes prayer seem hypocritical.

*"He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination." (Pro 28:9)*

It is as if God is saying – if you won't listen to Me, why should I listen to you? The one who walks away from God's commands cannot be interested in God's will. As we saw last week the power of prayer lies in it being God the Spirit sanctifying you to both know and do the will of God, so that you ask God for it. When you disobey the will of God, the chances are you will seldom pray the will of God. Indeed, you will pray selfishly, as James mentions:

*"Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." (Jam 4:2-3)*

God told Israel what He thought of praying when they were living in sin:

*“And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.” (Isa 1:15-17)*

To knowingly walk away from God’s Word, and then turn to Him to provide you with things is treating God like a fetch boy, not as the Sovereign Lord.

*“Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD:” (Pro 1:28-29)*

It is not that God cannot see or hear the prayer of a Christian who sins. That is a contradiction – for how could He then even hear your cry for forgiveness. God hears all our prayers. If we are saved, the blood of Christ has cleansed us of past, present and future sins. But when we live in wilful, unrepentant rebellion to God’s standards and laws – we display that we are not God-centred, and therefore do not pray His will.

The second attitude that will prevent our prayers from being heard is really a variation of the first kind – in other words, it is a type of sin. However, the Bible takes the time to mention it, and so should we. It is the lack of forgiveness. Jesus specifically taught:

*“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Mat 6:14-15)*

Refusing to exercise horizontal forgiveness amongst fellow men, when we have received vertical forgiveness from a holy God, is a contradiction of monumental proportions. Jesus illustrated it in Matthew 18 in the parable of the steward who was forgiven by his master, but throttled his fellow servant for a paltry sum of money. The reason why God does not answer us when we are in the grip of bitterness is that such an attitude is out of touch with the Biblical reality – that your love of God is illustrated in your love for others. John writes:

*“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1Jo 4:20)*

Another way of saying that might be – If a man says: “I know the forgiving God who has forgiven me, but does not forgive others”, he is a liar – for he that cannot forgive his brother whom he has seen, how can he claim to have experienced forgiveness from the God he has not seen. Peter also writes:

*“Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered. (1Pe 3:7)*

Bitterness is perhaps the most inviting environment for Satan, whereas it grieves the Holy Spirit. And do not deceive your heart into thinking that your cold indifference to

someone is better than not havng forgiven them – to be cold and indifferent is often worse than outspoken hate – and both come from a heart which lacks forgiveness.

The next kind of heart attitude that will hinder our prayers is double-mindedness. James says:

*“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.” (Jam 1:5-8)*

James says that the man who asks but is not sure if he really wants God’s direction shall not receive. The key here is single-mindedness, which goes hand-in-hand with God-centredness. The man who is lukewarm, who is half-worldly and half committed, who wants both the flesh and the Spirit, God’s wisdom but his own decisions – this man is double-minded. God is not mocked, and the double-minded man is not praying – he is playing. He wants to see if he can somehow trick God into giving him some things, while still continuing to live a self-centred life. This is not God-centred prayer, and so will not be answered.

So from the negative attitudes of unrepentant sin, a lack of forgiveness and double-mindedness, we move now onto the attitudes that God commands should be in our hearts for our prayers to be God-centred:

The primary one is obviously faith, In fact, I would include here – humility – humble faith, because they are really the same thing. Humble faith desires God above all things, and longs to see Him in His glory. Humble faith wants to see God.

*“Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.” (Mar 11:24)*

Of course, this verse and others have been horribly abused to teach a false gospel. Jesus meant that the one who prays in faith will have what he asked for. Well, what is faith? The root of faith is a desire to see God. The one who prays for this will definitely have it. Ask, and it shall be given unto you. As we will see next week, every Biblical request can be linked back to the glory of God. If you pray for God’s glory, you can know that God is so committed to that fact that He will always bring that to pass. So faith is not about struggling to believe God wants something for you and trying to convince God that you believe it. It is about wanting to see God glorified and making sure all our requests go to that ultimate aim. We can then know that if God says no, then He has another, better way to glorify Himself and satisfy us. So humble faith is answered because it is, of necessity, a God-centred prayer.

The second attitude often enjoined in Scripture is persistence. Jesus gave the parable of the unjust judge to show by contrast, that if a wicked judge can answer a request simply out of being tired of being bothered, how much more shall a good God answer His children when they continually cry out to Him. Persistence is also linked with the idea of continual prayer. The parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18 begins with this verse:

*“And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;”(Luk 18:1)*

Over and over again, we read ‘pray always’, ‘continue in prayer’, ‘pray without ceasing’. What does God mean by this, and why does He want it? Well, He does not mean that all we ever do every waking moment is pray. He means there is to be an attitude of prayer that pervades our lives, where most free thoughts are taken to God - whether observations, thanksgiving, requests, or meditations. This kind of continual focus on prayer is again, very clearly, a God-centred one. It is fairly easy for a self-centred person to do a religious prayer once a day and then live under his own steam for the rest of the day. But a God-centred life will produce continual prayer.

Taking things to God repeatedly also shows that we did not just ‘try’ God for a day or two, we believe He is our final, ultimate and only option. This shows we are centering our hopes and trust on God. Persistence is God-centred by looking nowhere else, and by its continual focus on God. If humble faith is the desire to see God, then persistence is looking nowhere else and refusing to give up looking.

A third attitude expected in a God-centred prayer is passion. James writes:

*“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” (Jam 5:16)*

Fervency – real, vehement heat, God-given zeal – this is God-centred prayer. Indeed, fasting is a reflection of this. You do not fast to impress God with an empty stomach, you fast because the zeal for God’s glory and will begins to so overtake you that you lose your appetite for a period of time. You hunger for God more than for food. The Bible mentions the strong crying and tears of the Lord Jesus in His prayer life, and of course the drops of blood He sweated in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Why is passion part of God-centred prayer? Because God is passionate about His glory. If God was not a passionate God; if He was not zealous and enthusiastic over His name, there would be no such things as God’s wrath, God’s judgement, God’s anger over sin. The very existence of these things shows that God’s heart is brimming over with zeal for what is right – that is, His glory, and brimming over with righteous indignation at what is wrong – that is, sin. As we saw, when we looked at the power of God-centred prayer, this does not come by forcing it or contriving it; it comes as we are sanctified by the Spirit. As we increasingly know and do the will of God from the Word of God, our hearts increasingly long for what God longs for. If humble faith is the desire to see God, and persistence is refusing to look elsewhere, then passion is the eagerness with which we want to see God.

A final heart attitude God seems to want from our prayers is what we might call bold reverence. Now that might sound like a contradiction, but it is not. We see both Hebrews 4:16 telling us that because of Christ our high Priest:

*“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb 4:16)*

But likewise, we are commanded in the same book:

*“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:” (Heb 12:28)*

Perhaps the closest analogy we use is that of appearing before a monarch, or a president, or head of state. If he is a good ruler, you will not be fearing for your life, trembling uncontrollably. You will have the boldness that allows you to sit in his presence and speak with him without breaking down. But on the other hand, you will not march in and slap him on the back and start to play wrestle him. His goodness gives you boldness, but his greatness gives you reverence. When we pray, God’s goodness gives us the humble boldness to speak to Him without feeling totally inadequate (which is how we should feel, all things being equal). But His greatness reminds us there is no place here for familiarity, being rash and cocky, like Solomon warns us from being in Ecclesiastes. This bold reverence is in line with someone who truly knows and is meditating in the Biblical truths of God’s goodness and God’s greatness.

So the attitudes of God-centred prayer both reflect and enhance God-centredness: humble faith, persistence, passion and bold reverence.

We now move from the inner heart to the outward actions. Now in this area, the Bible seems to commend different things at different times. Regarding the posture of prayer, we find people kneeling, bowing, standing, prostrate on the ground. Regarding the period for prayer we see people praying in the morning, in the evening, all night, three times a day, seven times a day. Regarding the period for prayer we find people praying silent, brief prayers and all night prayers before talking to a king. We see shortness of prayer encouraged; we also see earnest longing and persistent pleading encouraged. Regarding the place of prayer we see people praying outdoors and indoors, in a closet, at the Temple. We see people praying silently and we see people praying with strong crying. What all this amounts to is that God-centred prayer can take on many outward forms. The inward heart attitudes must be there, but the outward actions may vary from person to person and from situation to situation.

However, having said that, let us state some very practical tips for the practice of God-centred prayer:

Firstly have a place. It is true that you can pray anywhere, and at any time, but your most effective times of prayer will be those dedicated times of meeting with God. Jesus seemed to expect this when He said :

*“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” (Mat 6:6)*

We need a place of solitude, a place of quiet, where we can plead, sing, cry, or praise as we need to. If such a place is not available to you, then make one. Susannah Wesley, the wife of John Wesley and mother of 19 children, used to put her apron over her head when seated in the kitchen. When the children saw her in her ‘tent’, they knew she was in prayer and was not to be disturbed.

Secondly, have a regular time. We make appointments with all manner of other people, and make sure we keep them. We are not late; we write these appointments in

our diaries and personal planners. Make a daily appointment with God. Plan to meet God regularly in the Word and prayer every day at a certain time. In general, I suggest early morning. I do not know of many greatly used saints who met with God only at night or in the afternoon. Our Lord did it this way, and there is no way to walk in the Spirit throughout the day without having met with God and pleaded for grace for the day. If you hope to rise early, then plan to do so – go to bed early enough, set your alarm, and let your last thoughts be of God.

Thirdly, use the Word of God before and while you pray. The advice of George Mueller is greatly useful here. George Mueller would meditate on Scripture till his meditations turned into thanksgiving, supplications, requests and intercessions. The Word of God provides fuel on which to talk to God about. Furthermore, it often contains the very words we want to pray to God. I remember one missionary who shared how he prayed right through the Psalms one night. Let the Word of God warm your heart and fire your mind before you speak to God. I find writing down my meditations helps me greatly, which I can then look at and speak to God about in real heartfelt praise, thanksgiving or confession.

Fourthly, in some measure, plan what you will pray. Have a list. Decide who and what you will pray for on different days. Without a list, you will forget, and tend to ramble. The list is not meant to stifle you. It is your priestly work of carrying the names of people before the Holy Place and presenting it to God. You might split the list up into family, church family, new believers, unsaved, colleagues, sick, grieving, church leaders, missionaries, government, upcoming events, problems, personal areas of change needed, ministries, vision. You do not have to pray through your whole list everyday – that will probably discourage you from coming back the next day. Pray for the different categories on different days.

Fifth make other times to pray as well. It might be one lunch break a week. It might be a whole Saturday outdoors.

These steps are not cast in stone as absolutes – but they can give you some guidance and discipline, without which your prayer life will be as whimsical and infrequent – which is certainly not God-centred. God-centred prayer is not something you simply do, it reflect something you are – a God-centred person.

So, the practice of God-centred prayer means we must cast off lives of unrepentant sin, hearts of unforgiveness, and double-mindedness. We must put on humble faith – a desire to see God. We must pray continually, and persistently. We must pray passionately. We must pray with bold reverence. And we must plan to pray. Planning does not destroy spontaneity, it in fact creates it. A farmer plans – he sows carefully. When the spontaneous germination of seeds begins, it is because he sowed diligently and in a disciplined way. If we want to see and know God in our prayers in spontaneous rapture of soul, we must apply discipline to ourselves.

Having seen the purpose, the power and the practice of God-centred prayer, it remains for us to look at the Priorities of God-centred prayer – what do we pray for? What do you ask for if you are God-centred? That is what we will look at in our final look at God-centred prayer.